In reflecting on SYLEP 2017, I find myself sifting through endless memories, each holding a unique flavor and experience. Every day presented a variety of new challenges, activities and interactions, as I slowly became acquainted with the Saudi participants, the other Cultural Ambassadors, and the staff. One of the more distinct memories I have is helping to unload luggage from the airport shuttle, and trying to build up the confidence to greet them in Arabic (I had very little experience with native Arabic speakers at the time). I hesitantly said “assalamu alaykum” to the group, and they looked rather surprised. The rest of the afternoon was nothing but excited introductions and smiles. It was an abnormally pure feeling of “newness,” of doing something truly fresh. For this, I am eternally grateful, as SYLEP was one of the most unique and rewarding periods of my life.

In all honesty, I do not recall having any specific expectations regarding what my experience in SYLEP would be. Most likely, this was a byproduct of trying to go into it with a truly open mind and a blank slate. Very early on, though, this canvas was decorated with memories of wonderful experiences and people, and there was never a dull moment, in Washington D.C. or in Pittsburgh (my immersion city). Something that stuck out to all of the Cultural Ambassadors very early on was how direct and outspoken the Saudi participants were about bringing certain topics to the table. Dinner would sometimes begin with something like, “alright guys, let’s talk about economic inequality,” or, “what do you think of feminism’s portrayal in the media?” It was fantastic! Whether at dinner, on the roof, visiting national monuments, or at impromptu hang out sessions in front of the Giant supermarket adjacent to our hotel, conversation was always engaging, eye-opening and filled with laughs (for everyone). We talked about everything from politics to cars to music, and it was always pleasantly surprising to see just how much everyone had in common. I vividly recall discussing Jazz with Adhwa and Asmahan, hip-hop with Meshal, President Trump with Talal, feminism with Othman and cars with Abdulhameed, to name but a few.

These person-to-person interactions really impact how we perceive others. My mental picture of Saudi Arabia, as dictated by media, the classroom, and my own research, was quite different from the current generation of young Saudi Arabian professionals we spent the month of July with. They are driven, engaged, connected and motivated (and while this is not strictly relevant, always very well dressed!). When I look at my peers in the United States, and my peers from Saudi Arabia, I see that, at core, we are one and the same, sprinkled with different flavors and languages.

This came as a great comfort. One of my concerns going into the program was how exactly I would come to relate to and interact with the participants. How do I balance being professional and being a friend? When to lend a helping hand, and when to step back? What are we going to agree and disagree on? As a Cultural Ambassador, how vocal and honest should I be with my personal convictions about controversial topics that will inevitably surface? Given that the goal is to help the Saudi participants enjoy their experiences here, be comfortable, and be happy, my anxiety about this was through the roof. I quickly learned that, despite several thousand miles of distance and a vastly different social and economic culture, we are all truly one and the same, and that the Saudi participants are my peers akin to my peers at university in the United States. But beyond that, I consider them to truly be friends – an amazing group that never once left me feeling bored, unmotivated or
uninvolved. This was the biggest surprise. At the beginning we were all strangers, but in a matter of weeks, we became family. Every time I flip through photos and videos from karaoke and bowling with the Pittsburgh group, laugh about our beard arguments at Chipotle, cringe at my attempts to talk to everyone in broken Arabic, and laugh about our scavenger hunt across the National Mall, I cannot help but think of everyone as an extension of my family. This is why SYLEP 2017 will forever hold a place in my heart, and I extend the warmest thank you to everyone for making it so special.